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Accelerate our telecom future

In our modern age, where innovations in telecommunications abound, we often forget just how reliant we are on new technologies to operate our businesses, communicate with friends and family and grow as a community.

Take, for instance, a simple thing like e-mail. Communication through this one medium alone has exploded over the past decade, driving a grand total of 31 billion e-mails sent each day. It's no secret that this technology has radically changed the way we communicate.

And, what of cell phones, the Internet, and new, fast-growing technologies like Voice Over Internet? Can you believe that there are now more wireless subscribers in Maine than phone lines into homes? All these changes have grown up over the past decade - all after passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which still governs how America communicates.

It's clear that the ways we communicate have advanced light-years beyond the bygone world of 1996. So why are we allowing holdover laws to keep our telecom future at bay?

We have hardly begun to experience all that telecom has to offer - from revolutionary innovations that will grow our businesses and advance our economy to new learning opportunities and countless advanced communications tools that have yet to be conceived. We can open the floodgates of innovation by exchanging heavy government regulations for robust, head-to-head competition across all telecom competitors, regardless of the technology they use.

This approach is far more capable of fueling innovation because it puts modern consumer choices before dated regulations.

As the former president and CEO of The Loring Development Authority of Maine, I have worked to improve the quality of rural telecommunications in northern Maine. Based on my experience, I can confidently say that strengthening investment in our communications infrastructure and speeding the delivery of enhanced services can put Maine on the fast track to reinvigorating our local economies.

Thousands of new jobs in the financial and service industries have come to Maine because of this state's advanced telecommunications infrastructure, with a recently announced decision to bring 700 call center jobs to Oakland just one example of the growth supported by state-of-the-art networks.

When businesses are backed by the best technology, they are capable of first-rate competition with companies far beyond Maine's borders - and with this growth, new jobs for Mainers will follow.

I'm glad to see that Congress is taking up this issue through a series of hearings exploring new advances in telecommunications, from the exciting potential of VOI technology enabling consumers to place calls through their Internet or cable provider to the promise of broadband television offerings from phone companies.

These innovations can open up a whole new landscape of choices and services, and this progress, as well as other new inventions, will reach consumers much faster if all telecom providers are free to invest and compete in direct response to consumer demands.

What is the next big communications innovation? It's anyone's guess.

What I know for sure is that we must update U.S. communications policy to support a modern, competitive information economy. Our lawmakers also must take affirmative steps to ensure that all companies uphold vital social objectives, such as E-911 and law enforcement needs.

Chief among these priorities, a modern telecom policy must stabilize Universal Service, which ensures affordable basic phone service in rural areas and for low-income families, as well as providing schools and libraries with Internet connections.

With so much choice, innovation, economic opportunities and key social objectives hanging in the balance, our lawmakers cannot afford to put off this important reform effort.

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